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IN THECLAIMS

The status of the claims is as set forth below. For claims not marked as amended in this response, any difference in the claims below and the previous state of claims is unintentional and in the nature of a typographical error.

1. (Previously Presented) A vending machine comprising:

a cabinet frame including top, bottom, side and rear walls that collectively define a central cavity;

a door pivotally mounted to the cabinet frame, said door being selectively movable between an open condition, wherein access to the central cavity is permitted for loading of product containers into the vending machine, and closed condition, wherein dispensing of product containers is permitted; and

a plurality of column walls arranged within the cabinet frame and separating the central cavity into a plurality of product stack areas, each of said plurality of column walls being formed from a material sheet having top, bottom and side edges that define a substantially planar wall surface, said wall surface including a plurality of integrally formed stiffening elements extending between the side edges, and an integrally formed alignment member, wherein

the stiffening members minimize bowing of the plurality of column walls under a weight of product containers,

the integrally formed alignment member provides for proper positioning of product containers within the product stack areas for dispensing from the vending machine, and at least one of the plurality of stiffening elements comprises a decoupling member isolating a first area of the column wall from a second area of the column wall to minimize forces in the first area from being transferred to the second area.

2. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of column walls includes top, bottom and intermediate portions, said top and intermediate portions defining a storage region and said bottom portion defining a dispensing region.

3. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 2, wherein each of the top, bottom and intermediate portions includes at least one of the plurality of stiffing elements.

4. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 3, wherein the at least one of the plurality of stiffening elements constitutes a decoupling member provided on the bottom portion, said decoupling member isolating the dispensing region from the storage region to minimize forces in the top and intermediate portions from being transferred to the bottom portion.

5. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 4, wherein the bottom portion is separated from the intermediate portion only through narrow web members.

6. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 5, wherein the integrally formed alignment member is formed in the dispensing region.

7. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 6, wherein the integrally formed alignment member includes a guide element, said guide element being adapted to guide the product container away from the column wall.

8. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 2, wherein the integrally formed alignment member is formed in the dispensing region.

9. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 8, wherein the integrally formed alignment member includes a guide element, said guide element being adapted to guide the product container away from the column wall.

10. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 8, wherein the integrally formed alignment member is stamped from the material sheet.

11. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of stiffening elements defines an elongated, narrow slot.

12. (Original) The vending machine according the claim 11, wherein each of the plurality of stiffening elements extends fore-to-aft across the wall surface.

13. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 12, wherein each of the plurality of stiffening elements is stamped from the material sheet.

14. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 2, further comprising: a stiffener structure interconnecting at least two of the plurality of stiffening elements.

15. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 14, wherein the stiffener structure takes a form of an asterisk.

16. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 14, wherein the stiffener structure interconnects the at least two of the plurality of stiffening elements in the intermediate portion.

17. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 1, wherein the material sheet is made of 16 gauge sheet metal.

18. (Previously Presented) A vending machine comprising:

a cabinet frame including top, bottom, side and rear walls that collectively define a central cavity;

a door pivotally mounted to the cabinet frame, said door being selectively movable between an open condition, wherein access to the central cavity is permitted for loading of product containers into the vending machine, and a closed condition, wherein dispensing of product containers is permitted;

a plurality of column walls arranged within the cabinet frame and separating the central cavity into a plurality of product stack areas, each of said plurality of column walls being formed from a material sheet having top, bottom and side edges that define a substantially planar wall surface, said planar surface being defined by a storage region and a dispensing region; and

a stiffening element extending fore-to-aft across the planar surface in the dispensing region, said stiffening element comprising a decoupling member separating the bottom edge from the dispensing region such that the dispensing region is only connected to the storage region through web members defined about the decoupling member, wherein a transfer of any bow force from the storage region to the bottom edge is substantially eliminated.

19. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 18, wherein each of the plurality of column walls includes top, bottom and intermediate portions, said top and intermediate portions defining the storage region and said bottom portion defining the dispensing region.

20. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 19, wherein each of the plurality of column walls includes a plurality of integrally formed stiffening elements extending between the side edges.

21. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 20, wherein each of the top, bottom and intermediate portions includes at least one of the plurality of stiffening elements.

22. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 20, wherein each of the plurality of stiffening elements defines an elongated, narrow slot.

23. (Original) The vending machine according to claim 20, wherein each of the plurality of stiffening elements is stamped from the material sheet.

24. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 19, wherein each of the plurality of column walls includes an integrally formed alignment member.

25. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 24, wherein the integrally formed alignment member is formed in the dispensing region.

26. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 25, wherein the integrally formed alignment member includes a guide element, said guide element being adapted to guide the product container away from the column wall.

27. (Previously Presented) The vending machine according to claim 26, wherein the decoupling element is arranged below the integrally formed alignment member.

28. (Previously Presented) A method of forming a column wall used to form a stack area from product containers to be dispensed from a vending machine comprising:

providing a substantially rectangular metal sheet having top, bottom, and opposing side edges that define a substantially planar wall surface;

forming a plurality of vertically spaced stiffening elements out of the wall surface, wherein at least one of the plurality of stiffening elements comprises a decoupling member isolating a first area of the column wall from a second area of the column wall to minimize forces in the first area from being transferred to the second area; and

creating an integrally formed alignment member along the wall surface for positioning product containers for proper dispensing purposes.

29. (Original) The method of claim 28, further comprising: forming each of the plurality of stiffening elements with a fore-to-aft extending slot in the wall surface.

30. (Original) The method of claim 29, wherein the column wall includes upper, intermediate and lower portions, at least one of the stiffening elements being formed in the lower portion to decouple the lower portion from the upper and intermediate portions.

31 (Original) The method of claim 29, further comprising: interconnecting at least two of the plurality of stiffening elements through a stiffener structure.

32. (Original) The method of claim 28, further comprising: stamping each of the plurality of stiffening elements from the column wall.

33. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 28, further comprising: stamping the integrally formed alignment member from the column wall.